

February 15, 2015
Transfiguration Sunday
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Matthew 17:1-9

On April 3, 1968, the last night of his life, in Memphis, Tenn., Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke these words:

“Well, I don’t know what will happen now.
We’ve got some difficult days ahead.
But it doesn’t matter with me now.
Because I’ve been to the mountaintop.
And I don’t mind.
Like anybody, I would like to live a long life.
Longevity has its place.
But I’m not concerned about that now.
I just want to do God’s will.
And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain.
And I’ve looked over.
And I’ve seen the promised land.
I may not get there with you.
But I want you to know, tonight, that we as a people will get to the promised land.
...and I’m not worried about anything...
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

The Transfiguration. It’s always the Sunday before Lent begins. And even though I’ve preached on it year after year, I still hardly know what to make of this strange, fantastic story that seems to be part memory, part dream.

In Matthew’s gospel, we read that Jesus takes Peter and James and John apart from the others to a mountaintop. There, Jesus is transfigured. The Greek word, *metemorphothe*, means literally, “his form was changed.” He became dazzling white in appearance and the figures of Moses and Elijah appear to speak with him. A cloud overshadows them all and a voice calls, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him.”

The disciples are terrified, and don’t know what to do, so Jesus asks them to remain quiet, until later, when hindsight will help them to understand., as it so often does.

The scene of recognition. The mountaintop experience. A vision of the future – a glimpse of what is to come. The disciples have been confused and unsure about who Jesus is. Here on the mountain, they are given a tiny little peek at the truth. Afterward, they are still just as confused. Maybe more so. But the seed of understanding has been planted.

They still have a difficult, painful road ahead, and they don't understand what it means or why they must travel that road. But they have this experience to hold onto.

A fleeting glimpse of the glory of the coming of the Lord. An overwhelming, confusing, life changing, perplexing glimpse into God's realm.

Some believe that Matthew placed this story here as a preview of the resurrection, a foretaste of glory divine, where time stands still and heaven and earth meet. Where the past and the future collide with the present.

This sanctuary in which we gather today can be such a place, a Mount of Transfiguration. Not because it is such a beautiful place of worship, which it certainly is. Not because of the windows or the organ or the sense of history which is here. This sanctuary can be for us a Mount of Transfiguration because this is where we, as a community of faith, have chosen to gather. It's not about the space itself, but about what happens when we gather, in the presence of God.

Jesus did not make the trip to the mountaintop alone. He took James and John and Peter. Yes, even Peter – enthusiastic, bumbling, well intentioned, speak before you think Peter. Remember Peter's response when he saw Jesus with Moses and Elijah? "Photo op! Moses – could you move over a little to the left so I can get a better shot? Won't this be great when I upload it to you tube and post it on facebook? Okay, everybody smile!"

Yes, Peter was there too. Jesus did not go alone to the mountaintop. The moment of transformation happened in community.

Tiepolo was a painter who lived in the 1700's. When he painted this version of the Transfiguration, he used inks and washes – browns and greys.



Jesus and Peter and James and John are at the bottom of the mountain , just beginning the climb. No one's been transfigured yet. Jesus' friends are loaded down, carrying the bundles of stuff they'll need for the journey. One of them twists his robe and hikes it up as he steps over the rocks. They all look up the long distance they have to go. It won't be easy, but they are going together.

It is the same when our community gathers. Some make their way quickly, racing ahead, and others are slower, more deliberate. Some are weighed down with burdens, some are groping to make sense of what has happened to them. But whoever we are, wherever we've been, today, we are together, all who would follow Jesus, from the oldest to the youngest.

When we are together as a community of faith, we baptize new Christians and welcome them into the family of God. We get a glimpse of the great cloud of witnesses, alive and dead, who accompany us.

When we are together as a community of faith, we share in communion. Luke writes that the risen Christ walked with two of the disciples seven miles on the road to Emmaus, talking with them all the way. But they did not know who he was until they sat down in the evening to eat. And at the table, he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him. They said to each other, when he had vanished from their sight, "Were not our hearts burning within us the whole time he walked with us?"

When we come together as a community of faith, we gather with friends and with strangers, with saints and sinners, with people we love, and people who make us a little crazy, we share in the hope that one day our fellowship will be made complete and perfect in God's realm. We get a foretaste of that day when all people will come, friends and enemies, rich and poor, educated and ignorant, they will come- from the east and the west, from the north and south, and sit together at the table with God.

As Martin Luther King Jr. said, quoting the prophet Isaiah: I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

The reality is that we don't fully understand what happened to Jesus on that mountain top, any more than we understand fully exactly what happens when we come together as the body of Christ. It's not something that we can plan for or program or work into a long range plan.

But it does make a difference. Not because in our gathering together the world becomes different or our problems are solved or our pain disappears. It makes a difference because when we come together as a community of faith, you are different, I am different.

And when we are done here, you may turn to walk the stone trodden path back down the mountain; you may go back to difficulties and questioning and struggle. But you will be different because, here, among these people your eyes have seen the glory – the goodness – the promise of our God. You will have caught a brief foretaste of God's kin-dom -God's expansive, all inclusive realm.

And that may be enough to keep you going until your next sighting of eternity.

“This is my son, my beloved one – listen to him.”

Amen.